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ABSTRACT

The workshop method of teaching a college literature course has proved an effective means of stimulating independent student work, promoting teacher-student conferences, and providing for peer criticism. Discussions of both some specific principles of literary criticism and the historical background of the period to be studied introduce the course, which continues with student reading assignments followed by a short assigned paper. Student-teacher conferences then focus on these papers while the next reading and writing assignments commence. During the subsequent workshop sessions, good and bad passages from various papers are read and criticized, giving students simultaneous discussions of the literary works and their treatments of it. Individual papers receive explicit comments, but no grades. The final grade is based on the five papers the student considers to be his best. Since good writing--thought organized to a purpose--is compatible with any discipline, this workshop method may be used to advantage in any academic department. (JM)

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THE WORKSHOP METHOD:

BASIS FOR AN IDEAL COLLEGE CURRICULUM

I'm going to deal with the general subject of academic reform, but I'm going to approach it indirectly and from the limited and highly personal viewpoint of an English teacher who has had certain experiences that may or may not be unique. I should say right off that I don't really like to teach. If I were president of my school (or your school, or anyone's), I would begin--if I thought I could get away with it--by running off 90% of the students and faculty. The faculty I would retain would be those ladies and gentlemen who are primarily interested in high-class scholarly publication; they would sit around and write their books and articles, take coffee together at ten and tea at four (in a nice room with pretty pictures and big soft chairs), and they would dispense advice and reading lists to the students, who would be either working on long papers or preparing for exams that they would take sometime in the distant future. You can see that I've devoted most of my Utopian thinking to the betterment of the faculty lot (that's another thing, parking would definitely be the first area of improvement), which is a measure of how much I think about student welfare.

In dreams, that is. In real life I think a lot about student welfare, not that I have much choice. I mean, they're always <u>there</u>--in class, in my office when I come back from class, lined up outside my office when I show up in the morning, peeping nervously around the door, leaving notes, asking me to call them, calling me, thrusting term papers at me and poems and forms to be signed--that's the point, isn't it? Wouldn't they be doing something else if they could? Wouldn't we? Of course they and we would, but they're stuck with us as

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much as we're stuck with them. Sure, Archie, Veronica, and old laugh-a-minute Kirby make a great team in the classroom, but there isn't much we can do about bringing around the administration, the legislators, and all those parents to our way of thinking, so we make do.

How we do make do. Let's face it, teaching is one of the least rewarding occupations, and whose fault is that? Most of the blame can be put squarely at the feet of the teacher who says, with a sniff: "Well, I'm not one of those who appeal to the masses; my following is small but it consists exclusively of the better students." Gad, what self-delusion! Those students aren't following you, dummy, they're chewing on you to see if there's any juice left. To this kind of person, a good teacher is like an honest cop: rare, and highly suspect.

Ours is the only profession which boasts of its inefficiency. Once in a graduate course I had a student who had been away teaching for many years at another university and who had decided to come back for a Ph.D. One of the course requirements was an oral report; hers was awful, mainly because she was so hammy that she quickly alienated everyone else and they tuned her out shortly after she got started. I was appalled; here was a woman who was a university professor, yet she not only had no ability to communicate but she also managed to earn the contempt of the whole class through her silly clowning. After the bell rang I called her over and tried, as tactfully as possible, to explain what had happened. Her face fell. "I should have warned you that I was a ham." (In other words, she wouldn't have done it any other way.) But then she perked up. "That's the way I teach!" she said with a bright smile. And before I could express my dismay, she concluded her statement on the art of teaching, probably the longest she had ever made, with: "Isn't it nice to have a captive audience?"

The reason why there are so many bad teachers is that most teachers think the way I do, that is, they want Utopia. And they've decided to go ahead and

act as though it's here already. I know, because I'm an ex-bad teacher, and like the reformed whore who joined the choir, I'm going to sing as loudly as I can.

I never would have been saved if it hadn't dawned on me one day that I was teaching at the Dystopia, not the U. The revelation came quickly but it was years in the making. I had been wondering for some time why my writing classes were so much more successful than my literature classes: if I was good in one, how come I was bad in the other. That's when it occurred to me that there weren't good and bad teachers, just good and bad systems. As Buckminster Fuller says, you can't change the people, but you can change the system, and the result is the same as if you changed the people. So I started teaching my literature classes as though they were writing workshops, and the next thing I knew--well, it wasn't Utopia, but it sure looked good to me.

Here's how it works. The first day I begin by telling the students that they are all literary critics. This comes as a surprise to all, and most reject the label because (1) they think of critics, if they think of them at all, as people who publish rather than people who are trying to respond in some intelligent way to literature; for instance, they can't see any connection between Edmund Wilson's puzzlement over The Turn of the Screw and their own; and (2) it sounds too much like work. You're right, I tell them, it is work, so pay attention, because there are only ten weeks in the term and it's important that you get off to a good start. Then I discuss with the students a few practical principles of literary criticism: the work should be complex, it should be coherent; the reader must study it faithfully to determine the work's unique internal consistency that makes it unlike other works yet which places it within the tradition of literature; the reader must begin and end with the language of the text; he must be faithful to the entire work and not mistake a part for the whole, and so on.

This is followed by some general remarks on the period or genre or author that we are going to study. Let's say that the class is the standard 3-hour course in "American Literature, 1865-1914"; on the second and third days of class, then, I talk about American cultural and literary history in general and close with a discussion of the transition from Romanticism to Realism. Having given the students some basic critical and historical tools and having suggested further readings in those areas, I then assign a paper of about 500 words, due at the first class session of the following week. If the topic is, say, Emily Dickinson as Transitional Poet, I ask the students to read perhaps half a dozen particular poems, to be alert to both Romantic and Realistic elements in those poems, and to write a succinct summary of their findings.

At the first class session of the second week, all students turn in their papers and I use that period to have my first few conferences; the students not scheduled for conferences are free to start thinking about the second assignment, which I've written on the board. I have more conferences at the second session and, by the third session of the second week, I'll have read and commented on all the papers and prepared for presentation of them in a workshop session which all students attend (the conferences that I've had earlier not only benefit the students, they also help me to decide which points to emphasize in the workshop session). In a typical hour-long workshop, I read passages--both "good" and "bad," as long as they're stimulating in some way--from about a dozen papers and solicit criticism from the other students; by term's end, every student will have come in for some peer criticism at least two or three times. The nice part about the workshop sessions is their inherent economy; everyone gets a double return on the time and energy that he or she invests, since the students are discussing simultaneously the poems of Dickinson and their own treatment of them. At the end of the workshop, I remind the students of the assignment for the third week,

and the whole cycle begins again. At certain points in the term, and certainly on the last day of class, I'll pause to summarize what the class as a whole has studied to that point.

A note on the conferences--they're not as easy as one might think. You can run out of conversation awfully quickly, especially if you're meeting with a reticent student, so it helps to be ready to mention collateral points or look at a new poem together or try to find out if the student likes or dislikes Emily Dickinson and for what reasons. If the class is small enough, you'll get to see each student at least every two or three weeks; if the class is larger you might want to schedule extra conference time outside of class. Ideally, I suppose that teacher and student should discuss every paper, but since the students have the teacher's comments on every paper in addition to occasional peer criticism in the workshop sessions, once-a-week conferences aren't an absolute necessity.

That brings us to grading. I've found that it's too time-consuming to worry over letter grades for each individual paper; instead, I make my marginal comments as explicit as possible and, at the end of the term, I ask each student to give me his five best (in his opinion) papers in a manilla folder, and I base the final grade on that as well as such matters as class attendance and participation. (Needless to say, the students are required to write all the papers that are assigned, even though they turn in only five at the end of the course.) Students tend to consider this method a fair one since it calls for a certain amount of real work and cooperation on the part of both teacher and student and since it isn't predicated on the spurious notion of "progress"--it's okay for you to tell your students that they're going to enter your course as ignoramuses and emerge as geniuses, but don't blame them if they're a little skeptical; after all, that's what their teachers told them last term.

Other than some slight flair for organization on the teacher's part, the key to the whole method is the individual weekly assignment. I've found that it's best to avoid assignments that look toward a single right answer. A simple example of a bad assignment is to ask the students to figure out whose point of view is used in each of the separate sections of The Wings of the Dove; there is no benefit to the class as a whole because there is nothing to talk about after the papers have been turned in. On the other hand, a good assignment would be to ask whose point of view is used in each of the sections of the same novel and why; the "and why" part of the assignment will get you as many different guesses, most of them good ones, as there are students in the class, and this variety of opinion almost always provides for an exciting workshop session. Probably the best assignments are those posing problems to which the teacher himself does not know the answer; certainly these assignments are the most enjoyable from the teacher's viewpoint, and, if we agree with Guido Almansi's assertion that the teacher of literature can only teach when he doesn't know the answer, then this type of assignment becomes inevitable.[1]

As I have described it thus far, the workshop method sounds like a non-scholarly way of teaching (so long to those wonderful footnote-ridden lectures), but it isn't; the workshop teacher can spend as much time--or as little--reading and writing scholarly books and articles as his more traditional colleague. I have found suggestions for some of the more successful assignments in published criticism; for instance, a class of mine was getting ready to start The Ambassadors recently and I realized that a very particular kind of assignment was necessary since James makes special demands on the reader and since I couldn't expect them to read all, or even half, of the novel in a week. Then I recalled Ian Watt's deservedly famous explication of the first paragraph of The Ambassadors;[2] I re-read the article to refresh my memory and then made the following assignment:

asking the class to bear in mind that (as Watt writes) "the function of an introductory paragraph in a novel is presumably to introduce," I assigned a paper on the first paragraph of The Ambassadors and suggested that the students be particularly sensitive to elements of time in James's prose, to elements of place (particularly Europe), elements of humor, elements of style (such as sentence length), elements of characterization (e.g., what do we learn about Strether?), and so on. I suggested also that the students try a comparative study: what sort of opening paragraphs occur in the works of Fielding, Hemingway, Faulkner, Joyce? Although this assignment could be handled adequately by the student who has time to read only the first paragraph, it allows for the student who has read further and who has had a chance to verify or correct his initial assumptions about the novel. We had already decided to spend three weeks on The Ambassadors, and the second assignment was a general one on character relationships--again, an assignment based on my knowing that different students read at different rates. By the third week, however, I needed an assignment predicated on two assumptions; one, that everyone had finished the book; and two, that a comprehensive approach to the novel was needed. Again I nosed through the critical material for ideas and ended up asking for a paper on the novel's structure. Thus the class wrote three separate papers on the novel, each of which approached it from a different angle; by the time they finished, they knew The Ambassadors pretty well, and, thanks to the ideas for assignments that I had got from my research, they knew a little more about the methods of literary criticism. As far as the workshop method being of benefit to the publishing scholar, while it doesn't allow one to write lectures-cum-articles as he goes, it certainly provides more ideas for publication per class than the traditional way, and it allows one to check one's ideas for publication by trying them out first as class assignments.

There are several other points I could make about the workshop method, but I'll limit myself to three. First, it allows for more flexibility in scheduling. In my department, the great fear is that one will be given more than a single new course per term; this matters less with the workshop method, because the teacher doesn't have to spend all his time working up erudite lectures to which the class won't listen anyway. And the more expertise the better, of course, but the teacher needn't be a certified authority in a particular area to teach a course in it, since the workshop method is based on cooperative exploration rather than the passive acceptance of ex cathedra pronouncements. Secondly, because of the specific nature of the assignments, the workshop method virtually wipes out plagiarism, a problem which in itself has caused more than one teacher who wishes otherwise to drop paper-writing as a course requirement. Finally, since racist and sexist practices in the classroom are of so much concern today, it should be pointed out that it is that much harder to be a racist or sexist in a course that is as highly individualized as this one is. The ex cathedra teacher can pretty much say what he pleases since he never allows his students to get close enough to throw a punch. But if, like me, you are a white male teacher and you are sitting down to a conference with a black or a woman and you can still exercise your racism or sexism and feel comfortable doing it, then you are either more courageous or more stupid than I am and you're welcome to it either way.

In concluding, I think it only fitting that I give at least some attention to the announced topic of my essay, namely, the relation of the workshop method to the ideal college curriculum; actually, this is the easiest part of the paper and I would have got to it sooner if I hadn't felt that a detailed explanation of the method itself required more attention. Within limits, I can "prove" that the workshop method works in literature courses; a colleague of mine and I have used

it off and on for the last three years, and, since my university requires formal teaching evaluation, there is a certain amount of objective evidence for the method's success. But what of the other disciplines? Someone is bound to object that the workshop method won't work in History or Art or Education or Business. But is there any intrinsic connection between studying literature and writing about it that doesn't apply in other fields? Education is, or should be, an act of engagement, yet we fill our classrooms with passive audiences so that they can watch a teacher-magician pull rabbits out of a hat. I am sure that even the most imperious ex cathedra teacher is secretly aware of the mortality of man and his creations, and that he is glad, in his heart of hearts, that we don't teach auto repair and brain surgery the way we teach academic subjects.

To put it another way, good writing and sound education work toward the same end, i.e., thought organized to a purpose. For that reason, writing is compatible with any discipline, and the workshop method should be at home in any academic department. Maybe you can't teach Calculus according to the workshop method, but you can certainly teach the History of Mathematics this way. (From what I've seen in most schools, Calculus is probably widely taught in a manner that is much like the workshop method anyway, with lots of independent work, conferences, peer criticism, and so on.)

Please understand that I'm not prescribing for the Math Department or for anyone else, but I am hoping that we can talk to and learn from each other, and that brings me to one of the biggest problems that is currently facing us here in the Dystopia: the widespread contempt for pedagogy. As W. Ross Winterowd points out in a recent issue of College English:

> If an English Department member were to ignore literary theory because, in his opinion, it is all high-falutin, jargonistic foolishness, his

> colleagues would excoriate him; a responsible man knows his field, if only so that he can disagree intelligently. However, we think nothing of our colleague who belittles pedagogical theory, but who refuses to learn anything about it. ("After all, if it were worth looking into, I wouldn't belittle it, would I?")[3]

The obvious solution to this problem is to reward good teaching financially, but that's the subject of another argument entirely, and until that argument is made, and until it convinces the legislators, I frankly don't see why anyone should knock himself out in the classroom in order to make a couple of hundred dollars more than the drudge who puts in a fraction of that effort.

Now that all my cards are on the table, I imagine that someone out there is thinking, "The workshop method sounds great, but it'll probably take up too much of my time. Anyway, what's wrong with things as they are?" To the first point I can only say, try it; it doesn't take up any more time than any other method, plus you'll get more return for the time that you put in--no matter how erudite your lecture is, Professor, I'm still convinced that most of your students aren't listening to it. As for the status quo, my opinion of it would require a separate essay, so for the moment I'll simply say that I doubt if it does anybody much harm.

NOTES

[1]Guido Almansi, "The Mayonnaise Professors," London Magazine, 13 (1973-74), 34.

[2]Ian Watt, "The First Paragraph of The Ambassadors: An Explication," Essays in Criticism, 10 (1960), 250-74.

[3]W. Ross Winterowd, "The English Department and the Ideal Culture," College English, 35 (1974), 402.